CULCREUCH CASTLE

Culcreuch Castle is a fine imposing former fortalice located in an impressive setting in the Campsie Fells near Stirling in Central Scotland. Overlooking the larger of its private lochs, surrounded by parkland grounds and exotic trees and with the steeply wooded hillside behind, it has stood for the first four centuries of its life as the ancestral home of the Clan Galbraith. For the last three centuries it has been a prestigious family home prior to being converted into a country house hotel in 1984/5.

The main part of the Castle comprises a Mediaeval Tower with a Georgian wing added later.

The earliest parts date from the time of Maurice Galbraith (circa 1320), the Tower being completed by James Galbraith (10th Chief) by 1460. The walls are over 5' 6" thick in places.

The old Tower is rectangular in plan, 41ft. 2ins. by 28ft. 6ins. It contains three storeys and an attic, and its height to the top is 42ft. 6ins.

It is built of loopy limestone quarried on the Estate, with dressed quoins. The walls are topped by a parapet and a chequered corbel course under a slate roof.

The front wing was built in the first half of the 18th century and rises to the same height as the Tower with four storeys. Built of stone under a slate roof it exactly matches the original Tower.

Internally Culcreuch Castle has many fine features including a remarkable Bottle Dungeon, so called as the bottle shape meant a prisoner could not lie down, an Aumbry (normally only seen in ancient monasteries) and in the Chinese Bird Room hand painted oriental wall paper that dates from 1723.

There are also a number of magnificent fire places as well as superb panelling in The Oak Room.

The basement (on ground level) contains two barrel vaulted cellars, originally lit by window-slits, now converted to form the cosy Dungeon Bar/Diner.

At the entrance to the Dungeon Restaurant (the original entrance to the old Tower) is what remains of an old wheel staircase climbing to the height of the first floor - the stairs to the upper floors having being removed when the Tower was extended.

The first floor of the old Tower is one large space - the original Laird's Hall now used as a breakfast room, for meetings, and as a private dining room.

The front wing containing the Main Entrance, together with the impressive wide newel staircase which climbs all four floors, was added in the 18th century.

Two rear wings – one abutting the rear of the Tower and the other which includes a pepper-pot tower - were later additions.

The second floor of the old Tower consists of two bedrooms, one being the Chinese Bird Room, as does the third floor attic which has another two bedrooms.

In 1723, a significant aesthetic event occurred that would define the interior character of Culcreuch for centuries: the installation of the hand-painted Chinese wallpaper in what became known as the Chinese Bird Room. This room, situated on the second floor within the massive six-foot walls of the original tower keep, serves as a remarkable time capsule of eighteenth-century "Chinoiserie".

The wallpaper was painted on rolls in China and imported to Scotland, depicting an intricate landscape of exotic palms and colorful birds. At a time when Scottish baronial houses were often dark and utilitarian, the introduction of such vibrant, globalized decoration reflected the increasing wealth and international connections of the Scottish barony. The wallpaper has remained in its original position on the walls since 1723, making it one of the few, if not the only, genuine antique Chinese wallpapers of this period still surviving in its original Scottish setting.

The preservation of this room is particularly notable given the conservation laws that now govern it. The interior has been maintained with an array of satinwood and French furniture, including a half-tester double bed, which complements the delicate aesthetic of the wallpaper. Interestingly, the medieval infrastructure of the room remains; the original garderobe (privy) built into the thickness of the tower walls was converted in more recent times into a shower room, illustrating the pragmatic layering of centuries.

1298 - 1320

The origin of the Galbraiths of Culcreuch, an old Lennox family or “Clan”, is obscure by direct record but association by documentation shows them as the principal family of the name, with branches settled nearby in Baldernock, Kilpatrick and other parts of the Lennox area – with strong castles at Craigmaddie and Gartconnel.

Maldovan (or Malcolm), 4th Earl of Lennox, 1225-1270, granted to Gillemichel, Gillemartyne and Gillecondad, the three sons of Gilmychel, the lands of Bannarad (now Bannachra) along with certain islands in Loch Lomond including Inch Galbraith which became one of the strongest castles of the family, and Culcrewchis which, after the fortalice (the square tower) was built between 1296 to 1320, gradually replaced Inch Galbraith as the Galbraith's principal base.

By 1296, Culcrewchis was in the hands of Sir Arthur Galbraith of Gartconnel, the sixth Chief of the Galbraiths. His name is recorded for Culcreuch on the Raqulan Rolls which is a list compiled in 1296 of those obliged to pay homage to King Edward the First of England, though he supported King Robert the Bruce during the Wars of Independence (and hand-witnessed various of Robert's grants and charters).

Arthur died sometime after 1314, and left three sons, Patrick, 7th Chief of the Galbraiths, Maurice, (later 1st of Culcreuch) and Donald of Kilbride. On his death, it was Maurice's branch of Arthur's family who lived at Culcreuch and to whom credit is given for the building of Culcreuch by father and son during the period 1296 to 1320.

Patrick Galbraith of Gartconnel, the eldest of Arthur's sons and living elsewhere in Lennox, was appointed 7th Chief on the death of his father and had already been given the Stewardship of Lennox (an office held by his grandfather) in 1313. Patrick acquired further charters of land from the Crown, increasing the Galbraith landholdings, including those of Cammoquhil and Balcarrage before being succeeded by his son William.

William Galbraith of Garconnel, the 8th Chief of the Galbraiths continued acquiring lands for the Galbraith Clan, including Arlehaven and, after 1342, married a daughter of Kincaid of that Ilk, thus also acquiring the lands of Balmore and a quarter of Kincaid itself.

It was due to the death of William's son that the Chiefship then passed to the descendants of Sir Arthur Galbraith's second son, Maurice, resident at Culcreuch and credited with the building of Culcreuch with his father, and this was the point in history (and thereafter for 300 years) that Culcreuch became the central focus of the Galbraith Clan.

Maurice Galbraith was redesignated 1st of Culcreuch when his grandson James, son of his elder son Arthur (2nd of Culcreuch), became 9th Chief of the Clan Galbraith and 3rd of Culcreuch, around 1390.

1390 - 1624

For seven centuries, the Lairds of Culcreuch have not just witnessed history; they have often had a hand in making it.

The oldest parts of the Castle date back to before 1296, a time when Scotland was newly independent after the efforts of William Wallace and Robert the Bruce. Nevertheless, the clan families remained more or less permanently at one another's throats over the centuries.

Culcreuch was the seat of one of the principal branches of the Clan Galbraith for over 300 years.

The first recorded Laird was Maurice Galbraith, who with his father, Sir Arthur Galbraith of Gartconnel, is credited with the building of the Castle during the period 1296 to 1320. Maurice's

grandson, James became 9th Chief of the Clan in 1390, following the extinction of the line from Maurice's elder brother and thereon the seat of the Chiefship remained at Culcreuch until 1630. The tower of the present house is thought to have been built at the end of the 15th Century, and therefore by a Galbraith. There is no sign of ruins in the neighbourhood and therefore this tower is probably on the site of its 1320 predecessor.

The Galbraiths of Culcreuch were a warlike Clan and it is certain that the Castle witnessed much warmongering over time with its bottle dungeon in regular use. They did not live a quiet life! At the end of the 15th Century, Thomas was hanged for taking part in a rising under the Earl of Lennox. His estates were forfeited but later restored to his successor, James. In the 1550's the then Laird, James, turned out the teaching friars who had a settlement in the parish, and quietly added their lands to his. In 1560 he was making life very difficult for the "Reader" in the Fintry kirk and the Lords Council had to bring him heel.

The last two Lairds were John and Robert. John was "put to the horn" (outlawed) and Robert was accused of "hamesucken" (attacking a man on his home territory), was imprisoned in Edinburgh Castle, and was frequently "put to the horn". He got into debt and "wadset to", and finally gave his estate to his brother-in-law, Seton of Gargunnock in 1624. This Seton became a judge, taking the title of Lord Kilcreuch (1624), and sold the estate in 1632 to Robert Napier, 2nd son of John Napier of Merchiston (inventor of logarithms).

Culcreuch was used to garrison the Commonwealth forces during the Civil War in 1654.The Galbraiths were twice involved in uprisings against the Scottish Crown. The first in 1489 ended at the Battle of Talla Moss and led to the death of Thomas Galbraith, who had supported the Earl of Lennox against the Royal Party, guardians of the young King James IV. Another Galbraith of Culcreuch was in an uprising in 1526 and this resulted in the Battle of Linlithgow against the Douglas's in whose control the minor, James V, was held. This battle again ended in defeat for the rebels.

When not feuding on a national scale the Galbraiths used Culcreuch as a secure base from which to carry out a vendetta against their enemies. They were regularly bound over to keep the peace on the pain of heavy fines. Eventually it was financial hardship which forced the last Galbraith incumbent and possibly the wildest - Robert, to pass over the estate in settlement of his debts to brother-in-law Alexander Seton of Gargunnock, a Lord of the Session, in 1624.

Penniless, Robert Galbraith, 11th Laird of Culcreuch and 17th Chief of Clan Galbraith, fled to Ireland and disappeared into Irish history. Members of the Galbraith Clan from all over the world have since this time been searching, unsuccessfully to date, to discover who from amongst their number can prove themselves to be descended directly from Robert and thus claim to be the current Chief of the Clan.

1632

After 17 generations of occupation by the Clan Galbraith, the Napiers took over in 1632 and built a new wing to the Castle.

Seton only held the Estate for eight years before selling it to a Robert Napier, second son of the famous John Napier

of Merchiston, who invented Logarithms. John Napier was an interesting character in his own right. He dabbled in the occult and wrote a treatise on alchemy.

His successors proved more law abiding, taking an interest in County affairs and serving in the Army. In 1654 the Castle was occupied for a time by Cromwell's troops.

The Napiers were an important land-owning family in Lennox as well as in Merchiston (Edinburgh) - some were Provosts of the City - as, through an earlier marriage to a Lennox, they owned estates on the Endrick right down to the shores of Loch Lomond. They lived at Culcreuch for five generations before selling the Estate to Peter Spiers in 1769.

It was a Napier who either in 1721, (the date on the stone above the Castle door), or later that century, as thought by archaeologists, enlarged Culcreuch Castle by adding the new front wing. The interior and exterior of the old castle was also altered.

The last of the Napiers, Colonel R.Napier sold the Estate for a reputed £15,200 to a Mr. Spiers from Glasgow in January 1778.

1762 - 1901

Alexander Spiers, a prominent merchant, had made his fortune in Glasgow, which between 1760 - 1775 enjoyed a remarkable expansion due to its virtual monopoly of the tobacco trade in the Empire. He built a cotton mill in Fintry in an attempt to provide local employment, but the venture failed as transport was difficult over the rough roads of the time.

It was at this time (second half of the 18th Century) that the "nouveaux riches" of the day - the city merchants - started their country estates.

Peter Spiers was a Glasgow merchant - tobacco, etc. His arrival marked the entry of Fintry into the world of industry. Spiers and Robert Dunmore, Laird of Ballindalloch, each decided to erect a cotton spinning and weaving mill. (The names of some of the streets in Balfron - i.e. Cotton Street - are a reminder of this period). Between them they financed the realigning and regrading of the Crow Road (over the Campsie Hills to Lennoxtown) and so eased transport to and from Glasgow and to the canal at Kirkintilloch. Before this the gradients went up to 1 in 6 and a horse could only pull half a load in a cart. Fintry had one bridge over the Endrick (at the Gonachan) built in 1750 by General Wade's army engineers, from which there was a road to Denny and also a road through Culcreuch to Balfron and Kippen. Spiers decided to site the Mill further down the New Town. The Mill was water-driven, and for this he built the Walton dam and the dam below Craigton, and also the Mill-lade. This was all completed by 1800.

The cotton mill operated 20,000 spindles with 260 workers. The key workers were imported from Dewsbury in Yorkshire. There was also a small woollen mill on the north bank of the Endrick, just below the old bridge, and a distillery (Messrs Cowan & Co), just east of the Quarry, which produced 70,000 gallons per year of malt whisky. This distillery to a certain extent supplanted the numerous illicit stills in the neighbourhood. Fintry was the local "kirk town",and the road to Killearn and Balfron became a "turnpike" and tolls were collected at the Fintry Inn. Houses were built along the south side of the road, with gardens on the other side running down to the river. For the most part those were in sets of four - 21ft. 3ins. frontage and 28ft. 3ins. deep. The front door led into a small lobby and from there into a single room on each side, each

single room leading to two smaller rooms at the back. The upper floor was reached by an outside stair at the back. The door similarly led into a lobby and again into one larger room at each side at the back - each into smaller rooms at the front. They had garrets reached by a ladder. Additionally, there were two larger individual houses facing the bridge. The flats were let out according to the size of the family - up to four children for the lower "flats" and more than four children to the top "flats". Remember "child labour" was within the law at this time.

Trade was carried out by five shopkeepers - a baker, a shoemaker, a tailor, a saddler, a carrier, and five public houses. The mill workers were partly paid by tokens which were exchanged for goods at the mill shop or the village shops, some of which were owned by Mr. Spiers. So the village, and the New Town, from a largely agricultural population (over 1,000 in 1660 and shrinking to 550 by 1780) rose to over 1,000 again with an industrial majority. In 1830 or so the industrial bubble had burst. Cost of transport to and from Glasgow was one disadvantage, but the death blow was the development of steam from coal as against a water-driven mill where production varied with the availability of water. For minerals, the valley had coal, red ochre, and alum, but in unworkable quantities.

By 1850 the cotton mill, the distillery, and the small woollen mill had all closed down. The local Kirk Session Minutes have several references to the problem of unemployment. The Clachan of Fintry itself lost place to the New Town. There were then many cottages round the Clachan Inn and at the Gonachan. The last to disappear - it was pulled down in the 1940's - was locally known as "the Castle" - on the west side of the bridge over the Gonachan. There was a further absorption of farms and simplification of farming to concentration on beef and mutton. The result was the population dwindled to 220 by 1930. There was also mechanisation of farming creeping in. (An interesting fact on this point is that in 1914 there were 34 working horses in the parish. - by the end of the twentieth century there were only two "pets" at Bogside).

Peter Spiers was fortunately rich but also had vision. His vision may have been slightly out of focus, but his enthusiasm and his money were directed, partly at least, to the welfare of Fintry.

1901

In 1890 the last of the "Spiers" - a daughter - sold the Estate to Mr. J. C. Dunwaters, whose family had farmed in the parish, and who was one of the proprietors of the Outram Press, a large Scottish publishing conglomerate. In 1901, he sold the Estate to Walter (later, Sir Walter) Menzies, and emigrated to Canada where, in British Columbia, he bought an estate and named it Fintry. Sir Walter, who used Culcreuch Castle as a private home, was succeeded by his son. In the early 70's, on the death of his son's widow, her nephew, Mr. Hercules Robinson became the owner and Laird of Culcreuch.

Hercules Robinson saw the potential of Culcreuch as a tourism venue and made a concerted effort to attract visitors and establish a business by offering tours of the Castle and lunches to the general public and passing coach tours.

1970 -1984

By the 1970s, Culcreuch Castle and Estate had passed into the hands of Hercules Robinson, the last remaining member of that line of the Menzies family.

Hercules Robinson saw the potential of Culcreuch as a tourism venue and made a concerted effort to attract visitors and establish a business by offering tours of the Castle and lunches to the general public and passing coach tours.

Later, with assistance from the Scottish Tourist Board, eight Scandinavian-style self-catering holiday lodges were built within the grounds of Culcreuch Estate, close to the Castle.

Sadly, the fledgling business did not generate sufficient capital to make the necessary investment in the Castle for its ongoing operation and the whole Estate was placed on the market in 1984.

1984-2007

In 1984 the Estate was purchased by Arthur Haslam and David Littlefair with the vision of developing the Castle and Estate over time into a thriving tourism venue, whilst preserving the character, fabric and ambience of yesteryear for the benefit of future generations.

Culcreuch Castle was steadily and tastefully converted into a 3-star Hotel and Wedding Venue, with public spaces, restaurants, bars and a custom-built Business & Conference Centre.

Arthur's son, Andrew Haslam, took up residence in the Castle in 1984 and thus the title "Laird of Culcreuch" passed to him. He was largely responsible for spearheading work undertaken to open Culcreuch Castle as the unique country house hotel it remains to this day.

2007-2020

In 2007 the estate transferred to new owners based in Los Angeles.

Early in 2007, the new owners appointed Robert Reynolds as General Manager.

Robert has years of experience in the customer service and hospitality sectors and has been involved in managing hotels in Argyll, Caithness and Lochaber, before settling at Culcreuch. He and his staff are committed to ensuring your stay at the Castle is relaxed, enjoyable and memorable.

He made the decision to close the hotel in 2020, ending 700 years of continuous habitation.